



# **Sex-work and Mobility as a Coping Strategy for Marginalized Hungarian Roma Women**

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## **Abstract**

The increased inflow of Hungarian sex-workers has significantly shaped Zurich's inner-city red-light district since 2008. Conversely, the social structures in the home settlements of these Roma sex-workers in Hungary have developed in a fundamentally different direction. These women – usually branded as suppressed, destitute and marginalised – act simultaneously as breadwinners, legal prostitutes, transnational mothers and labour migrants within Europe. The driving forces of this recent development are outlined in this article and analysed within a new theoretical framework of migration theory. Whereas neo-classical economic theories cannot fully explain why some households of marginalised groups, such as the Roma, step into prostitution and migration, this study attempts to overcome the current research impasse regarding legal sex-work migrants by using empirical analysis with qualitative methods and a multi-sited approach. This investigation reveals that for most Hungarian sex-workers in Zurich, prostitution and mobility are parts of a coping strategy to deal with economic and social marginalisation. Therefore, the reasons for prostitution and the mobility of those women are deeply embedded in the macroeconomic, political and social exclusion of Hungarian Roma.



## Introduction

Since 2008 Hungarian sex-workers<sup>2</sup> have been the connecting link between small and remote settlements in Hungary and international cities such as Zurich and Amsterdam. As labour migrants, they have created a new reality at their destinations by reshaping public spaces and in their home settlements by remodelling socio-structures. Furthermore, being a Romni (Roma woman, pl. Romnija), a transnational mother<sup>3</sup> and a prostitute at the same time evokes a social empowerment within the men-governed Roma society. Therefore, this new reality of consciously fulfilling these three roles to overcome socio-economic marginalisation has spatial, transnational, ethnical and gender-related dimensions.

In contrast to Marxist-socialist feminists who define all women within a framework of being dependent on men as prostitutes (such as Giesen and Schumann, 1985), and who consider prostitution as a structural phenomenon (Overall, 1992) with the objectification of their actors, this article postulates sex-work as legitimate work. It further argues that not all sex-work migrants are victims of human trafficking, but considers prostitution as self-determining action (cf. Grenz, 2007; Ruby, 2012).

Furthermore, the article considers long-distance labour mobility as part of a circular-migration pattern and indicates that neo-classical economic migration theories (Corry, 1996; Harris & Todaro, 1970) are insufficient to explain the migration and mobility of marginalised groups. In the case of Hungarian sex-workers, mobility and prostitution became parts of a strategy to cope with socio-economic marginalisation, in which push-and-pull factors were not as such relevant.

The social, spatial, legal and political influences on marginalisation processes of the Roma are discussed in the first section of this article, elaborating why and how prostitution and mobility have become coping strategies. Subsequently, the concept of coping as handling stress, like Folkman, Lazarus or Morris (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984; Lazarus, 2013; Morris et al., 1976) understand it, will be discussed using an innovative perception of migration theory and recent empirical evidence. In the second part of this article the organisation of the mobility will be elaborated by focussing on the role of the sex-workers' "pimps" and their family networks as well as on their function as transnational mothers. All three elements not only have a strong influence on the mobility itself, but also mirror the active role of the sex-workers in regards to shaping their own reality. Finally, the transnational mobility patterns are analysed as well as the

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<sup>2</sup> In this paper, the author uses 'sex-workers' and 'prostitutes' to reflect the local terminology used by the Hungarian sex-workers to refer to themselves and their work. Unlike in other countries, 'prostitute' is a term that sex-workers use without judgement or stigma to identify themselves.

<sup>3</sup> While living and working in Zurich separated from their children in Hungary this situation reflects one variation of motherhood. Referring to Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila (1997) this arrangement is called *transnational motherhood*, which shall be elaborated further below.

newly emerging inner Swiss mobility of Hungarian sex-workers, as they reflect flexible coping towards socio-economic changes and emergent forms of discrimination.

Labour mobility of legal sex-workers in Europe has been an unfashionable topic until recently. The literature on trafficked sex-workers (Buckley, 2009; Eren, 2006; Tjurjukanova, 2006), does not provide much data on legal sex-work migrants. Furthermore, there has been research on legal cabaret dancers in Switzerland (Dahinden, 2010; Thiévent, 2010b, 2010a), but not on Roma women engaged in street prostitution. This qualitative research of Hungarian sex-workers in Switzerland attempts to fill this gap. It also aims to dissociate from homogenising trafficked or exploited persons with legal sex-work migrants of poor backgrounds. The essential distinction between these categories, further, requires an acceptance of conscious agency amongst marginalised individuals and societies.

The impact of transnational sex-workers using public spaces in Hungary and Switzerland are discussed in previous articles (Finger, 2014, 2013b), whereas the ethical aspect of empirical research and their methodology is outlined in a later publication (Finger, in press). This work forms part of a wider research project; hence, these issues will not be dealt with at great length in this instance.

### **Methodological approach**

Situating local phenomenon into a global context requires analysis of the actors' geographical and contextual changes, since both help to follow moving actors (Gallo, 2009). This multi-sited approach is no longer used only in ethnography, but it has become a strong interdisciplinary research tool, especially in migration studies (Marcus, 1995, 2009; Falzon, 2009; Leonard, 2009; Nadai and Maeder, 2009). However, position and role of the researcher have to be constantly adapted (Marcus, 1995) and access to different research fields must be generated separately. In the case of Hungarian sex-workers this was achieved by speaking their mother tongue, being patient to sensitive topics and generating trust between informant and researcher over a long period of time.

The study required a bilingual approach, as interviews were conducted both in Hungarian and German. Data was collected using forty-one guideline-based interviews with Hungarian sex-workers (in their mother tongue) in Zurich, and another seventeen in Hungary, where three of the interviewees were returnees from Switzerland. In addition, the author spoke with partners of sex-workers, inhabitants of Roma settlements (in Budapest, Pécs and Nyíregyháza), representatives of municipal administrations and police departments in Hungary, and with social workers in both countries. All interviewees asked not to be cited directly and to remain absolutely anonymous. This does not in any way impinge on the quality of the data collected, as most of the interviews occurred within a comfortable conversational situation, which led to the creation of trust and valuable knowledge

transfer. In addition, the interviewees were open to answer questions or to explain unclear phenomena even weeks after their interviews.

Further, since the interviews were conducted in Hungarian and German, statements translated directly into English would lose their force of expression. Therefore, the empirical data is not presented with direct quotes, but with indirect references.

### **One Roma settlement as a hub for sex-workers**

According to estimates given in interviews by Hungarian representatives of a diversity of municipal administrations, police departments, welfare institutions and NGOs, at least ninety percent of all sex-workers in Hungary are Roma. To acquire an understanding of the mechanisms of their labour mobility towards Western Europe (since 2008), it is necessary to first go back to the Roma settlement in Nyíregyháza (Hungary) called Guszev (see map 1), the main area of origin for transnational sex-workers in the red-light district of Zurich. This geo-historic context sets up an interesting set of questions dealing with socio-spatial exclusion and how this ties into coping mechanisms.



**Map 1: Hungary with image detail of Nyíregyháza and Guszev settlement.**  
**Source: bing.com, fols.hu, own composition 2014.**

The stigmatisation of sex-workers and their spaces are broadly examined by Ruhne, Hubbard and Sanders (Hubbard et al., 2008; Hubbard, 1998, 2001; Löw and Ruhne, 2009; Ruhne, 2008; Sanders, 2004). Hubbard and Sanders for example moved the focus from the fact that prostitution occurs only in certain places to how these spaces eventually affect the construction of sex-workers' identities. In addition, their contribution to prostitution spaces as abandoned geographies has reopened the discussion on sex-work and its stigmatisation. Ruhne's research, however, contributes to how prostitution and their (excluded) spaces are controlled by urban spatial structures, bridging the control and constitution of spaces with

gender and body. Further, the (re)creation of space through body and performance (cf. Butler, 1988) has been discussed in other articles - on the performativity of prostitution spaces by female sex-workers in public spaces of Hungary - by the author (Finger, 2013a, 2015) and shall not be repeated at this point.

Nevertheless, it is important to understand the ambivalence of socio-spatial marginalisation. Following Mitchell (2001), one can recognise an outsourcing of the poor, especially in revanchist and postmodern cities. These new islands of poverty, notably for the Roma, are places of refuge and survival (Vašečka, 2003) on the one hand, while they symbolise further marginalisation on the other. Prostitution areas in public spaces belong to the same ambivalent pattern of survival and stigmatization, while their level of acceptance and visibility is being dominated by the public's moral geography (Hubbard, 1997).

Exclusion processes of Hungarian Roma started with the economic transformation in the 1990s, which "has put the greatest burden of all on the Romany population" (Kertesi, 2004, 3), and street prostitution (mainly exercised by Romnija<sup>4</sup>) became more visible, especially in Nyíregyháza. According to local NGOs and city council officials the number of street-based sex-workers increased in the early 1990s. Special social structures, such as a non-homogeneously grown community with Roma families from all over Hungary, as well as the geographical location of Guszev, provided necessary conditions to plan and organise prostitution.

It was impossible to hold interviews on sexuality with other Roma communities of Nyíregyháza since it is still one of the main taboos of their culture. The Roma in Guszev on the other hand were more open. Guszev has developed only over a period of twenty years out of many families and different clans, where taboos were easier to overcome, due to new social conventions.<sup>5</sup> More recently, the settlement turned into a hub for sex-workers coming from Nyíregyháza and its surrounding area and then leaving after a certain time, mainly to the Netherlands and Switzerland.

This new function of the hub has also caused a massive increase of the Roma population in Guszev since 2005, when about 1,000 inhabitants were assumed to live there (Ringold et al., 2005, 174). Today about 270 families with approximately 2,500 persons, ninety percent of whom live below the poverty line, reside in Guszev (Finger, in press). Most inhabitants are unemployed and live off a combination of social welfare and prostitution. They have to pay a monthly fee of about 10,000 HUF (~ 33.5 Euro) for state owned social housing. This housing comes without legal access to electricity or working heating systems and is cut off from water and sanitation. Buildings are in ruinous condition, lack insulation and retain moisture, especially in the winter. These are unquestionably slum conditions.

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<sup>4</sup> Interviews with social workers in Budapest and Nyíregyháza.

<sup>5</sup> Interview with social worker/historian in Nyíregyháza.

In order to cope with socio-economic exclusion in Nyíregyháza and harsh living conditions the various Roma communities have developed a range of strategies. The following section elaborates these strategies within the theoretical frame of coping mechanism and with a particular focus on migration and sex-work as two different parts of one strategy.

### **Coping with socio-economic marginalisation**

Although this study is not a psychological analysis of how these Roma communities react to unbearable living conditions, it is still important to understand the concept of coping as such. Furthermore, I understand the conscious action of coping to intersect with the migrants' self-determination. According to Lazarus and Folkman (1984) the key factor for changes in life is stress, which may or may not be a harmful experience (Holmes and Masuda, 1974). Further, coping with stress can be an unconscious or conscious action, whereas the latter one is been distinguished in problem-focused and emotion-focused coping (Carver et al., 1989). Active conscious coping is a form of threat management, which includes the understanding of the threat itself as well as the development of a plan to overcome the stressed situation (Lazarus, 1993). In other words active coping is the conscious development and practice of a strategy. Suffering from chronical stressors (cf. Elliott, 1966, in Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), like social and economic marginalisation, since the early 1990s, the Guszev community came up with their own coping strategies, including, first, prostitution and later, translocal and transnational mobility. These strategies, mainly developed by the women, not only represent cross-border migration but also create 'counter-geographies of globalization' (Sassen 2000). Sassen's concept of counter-geographies refers to the feminization of survival, which in the end has an important impact on developing economies (ibid.).

From the perspective of social resilience theory, such a self-chosen strategy can be defined as a livelihood strategy (Finger, 2013b). Originally, the concept of social resilience is based on the theory of ecological resilience (cf. Folke et al., 2002), which considers not only the ability of ecosystems to recover from shocks, but also to adjust (change) to new conditions (Gunderson and Holling, 2002). The concept of social resilience has only referred to migration as adjusting strategies of societies which have been exposed to natural hazards. From a socio-geographical perspective, social resilience can also be understood as a coping strategy in consequence of social exclusion and ethnic or gender discrimination (Finger, 2013b).

Aside from the socio-spatial conditions in Nyíregyháza mentioned above, the political development of Hungary had fundamental implications on the Guszev community's coping strategies. Significant were the 1990s, when western firms settled down with new technology and enforced the privatisation as well as capitalisation of the former socialist country. Consequently, low and unskilled labour was no longer needed in Hungary's tertiary sector (Kertesi, 2004;

Szoboszlai, 2012). The foreign proportion of the value added increased in Hungary up to fifty percent in the industrial sector (Grell, 2008). In 2007, Hungary was the EU member state with the lowest economic output (Fenz et al., 2007), while failing to avoid further marginalisation of the Roma (Szalai, 2008). With less job opportunities, all Roma communities of Nyíregyháza have been engaged mainly in *kukázás* (recycling and reselling used materials), undeclared work and urban gardening since the early 1990s until today.

Prostitution, together with illegal money lending, became the most profitable strategy for the Guszev community to cope with socio-economic marginalisation in the mid-1990s.<sup>6</sup> Offering sex on the streets of Nyíregyháza was tolerated by the police until 2006, when, following an unpublished police report, about 3,500 sex-workers and their pimps were taken into custody in Nyíregyháza between 2006 and 2010. Hungarian law does not forbid prostitution in general, but outlines different no-go areas, such as public spaces and streets (Hungarian Prostitution Law: 1999. évi LXXV. törvény, 7. §), usually covering most of the city. This socio-spatial marginalization fosters discrimination against sex-workers, due to stigmatisation and considering prostitutes “as unnatural or deviant, potentially ‘polluting’ civilised society” (Hubbard, 1997, 135). One of the first consequences of the 2006-2010 arrests was intra-city mobility – moving from one place to another until being arrested again. Eventually, prostitution in Nyíregyháza could not generate any further income for the Guszev community and, thus, other opportunities outside of Hungary were explored. Therefore, mobility was a necessary consequence in order to continue prostitution. Nevertheless, it only represents one part of an overall coping strategy (but a very important one).

### ***Mobility as part of a loophole strategy***

The following section contributes to new migration theory with a focus on marginalised groups, which follow a so-called ‘loophole strategy’. This strategy neither represents a selection of opportunities, nor a summary of advantages and disadvantages, and it is not the result of rational gauging. The assumption (developed in the late 1980s by e.g. Richmond (1988)) that marginalised groups cannot always independently choose their direction in life in the face of poverty and persecution is only partly true and victimises marginalised societies by taking away their ownership and agency. Similarly, recognising sex-workers as passive victims may limit their options (Agustín, 2005; James, 1989) and complicate their future processes of moving on (Sanders et al., 2009).

The notion of *loophole* is mainly used in legal terms when it comes to evading rules or laws by purposely finding ways around them or through apertures and small gaps. In this article loopholes are understood as both gaps in legal regulations and ways around them, analysing loopholes as a coping mechanism that

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<sup>6</sup> Interviews with sex-workers, social workers and the police.

arises within the context of economic and social marginalisation. Those activities can be informal, irregular and sometimes illegal, and represent a certain understanding of creative and innovative action as well as a self-determined decision to sustain livelihoods of individuals or entire communities. Flexibility and adjustments of coping strategies are necessary, since coping is understood as a process (Lazarus, 1993). Further, informal niche economies of the Roma such as artistic expressions, fortune telling, street performances, busking (Kroner, 1997; Okely, 1994; Ries, 2007), or prostitution can be part of one coping strategy but are understood as different loopholes. Therefore, this article refers to a new theoretical classification where mobile marginalised groups are considered as conscious and independent migrants.

Whereas, “push-pull theories of international migration explain migration flows in terms of supply and demand for labour between sending and receiving areas” (Collinson, 2009, 4), de Haan and McDowell (1997) state that the static push-and-pull concept is unsuccessful in explaining the reason for movement, the actors as well as the time, period or destination of migration (ibid.). According to the traditional conception, transnational mothers, for example, would only migrate to satisfy their own needs and not those of their children. Any kind of remittances or investments in the home countries are also not covered by neo-classical approaches, as those (social) acts do not conform to one’s own prestige. These concepts also struggle to explain why some people move and others do not; why some move short and others long distance; and why entire communities or ethnic groups move only to specific parts of certain cities. Neither have they considered decision-making processes at household level, nor the existence of a variety of different opportunities. By understanding migration as coping with stressful situations in the home country and as part of a consciously elaborated strategy to reduce harmful risks in the long term, one can find answers to these questions.

For the sex-workers from Nyíregyháza, mobility became part of their coping strategy only after massive arrests. Instead of moving immediately to the west, only a few women and men (pimps) did move away. Some worked in Hungarian-speaking regions in Romania (Transylvania) or in Slovakia, where economic conditions were not necessarily better than in north-eastern Hungary. Today the attempt to move east is considered a failure by the community due to the combination of high mobility costs and limited income possibilities. Only when the first migrants explored the legal situation in Switzerland, the Netherlands and Germany did the sex-workers move westwards. Today street prostitution plays a secondary role in Nyíregyháza, but the Guszev settlement still has its important function as a hub, with its family-based relationship pattern between pimps and sex-workers that underlies circular (but not ad infinitum) labour mobility. Whereas mobility represents one important loophole of the coping strategy, prostitution is considered another crucial one and is thus further elaborated below.



### *Prostitution as a part of a loophole strategy*

As only a small segment of Hungarian sex-workers in Zurich do not consider themselves as Romni (Forrai, 2012), the focus here is on coping strategies of Hungarian Romnija. Hungarian sex-workers with no Roma ethnicity have indeed different reasons for coming to Switzerland. In general, many households (besides the Roma) were pushed into poverty due to cheap Swiss Franc loans, which could not be repaid with the arrival of the financial crisis in 2008. According to the Hungarian Central Statistical Office (HSCO), seventy percent of all personal credits in 2008 were foreign currency loans (Pukli, 2009). The collapse of the Hungarian Forint made amortisation impossible; to cope with financial distress, property was sold and prostitution was practiced to generate further income. Since coping with a stress situation means “to attempt to control it” (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984, 170), both loopholes, selling property and prostitution, allowed those people to stabilise their finances.

Hungarian Romnija in Zurich, most of whom came from Guszev in Nyíregyháza, had a range of different reasons for getting engaged in street-prostitution abroad. Predominant reasons for this were social marginalisation and the uncertain legal status of prostitution in Hungary. There is no doubt that police enforcement in Nyíregyháza in 2006 was the main reason women left the area, but it was not the reason they decided to engage in prostitution. Furthermore, EU citizens are allowed to ask for a ninety-day work permit per calendar year in Zurich. After about 1,300 arrests in Nyíregyháza only in 2008 (credited to an unpublished police report) the number of Hungarian sex-workers decreased there, while it significantly increased in Zurich at the same time. Looking at the demand-side of sex-services, Le Breton (2011) states that the European sex-market underlies a process of exoticizing, which is based on neo-colonial imaginations, with which foreign sex-work migrants are associated. In addition, Hungarian sex-workers were able to offer their services below the average price in the first years while still making profit.<sup>7</sup>

According to the sex-workers, labour conditions of the street prostitution sector in Zurich were worse than in Hungary. Zurich and Amsterdam became the main destinations only due to the legal work permit, thereby providing another loophole. Better income possibilities in the west are only partly true, because the income depends on seasonal fluctuations and expenses in Zurich, particularly housing, which can be higher than the general income of sex-workers. Some of them reported paying monthly rentals of up to 4,000 Swiss Francs for a single room, while their income per service varies between 30 and 100 Swiss Francs (Finger, 2013b). A further important determinant to work abroad in the sex business was the desire to break through conservative social conventions. Investments in better housing in Hungary and especially in education of the sex-

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<sup>7</sup> Interviews with social workers and Hungarian sex-workers in Switzerland.

workers' children were the most important actions undertaken to achieve that breakthrough (cf. Poirine, 1997).

This testimony of sex workers makes clear that prostitution and mobility are coping mechanisms Hungarian Romnija have used within uncertain socio-economic conditions. Because it was not the intention of the Guszev community to practice prostitution in Switzerland in the first place, mobility became a tool to continue with legal sex-work outside of Hungary. Since legal (street) prostitution in Zurich's red-light district is being exercised by hundreds of Hungarian Romnija, there is not only a strong network of sex-workers and their family members, but also a certain organisation of the transnational mobility and their associated remittances. This pattern of mobility is explained in the following section, in order to provide an understanding of the functions of family networks and sex-workers' agency.

### **Organising mobility**

Generally migrants "selling sex are boditarian cosmopolitans [...] by engaging in embodied practices such as migration and sex work" (Mai, 2013, 1243). Both practices can deteriorate a person's situation and exacerbate existing vulnerabilities, especially those of psyche and body; yet at the same time, they can be an empowering mobility practices (ibid.). The same phenomenon has been observed with street-based Hungarian sex-workers in Zurich, who experienced social marginalisation due being a foreign prostitute (despite being Romnija in Hungary). Conversely, their financial situation improved in the first years and advanced their families' livelihoods. These boditarian cosmopolitans have individual life stories and are often mothers who are strongly attached to their families, which makes it difficult to generalise their mobility behaviour. Further, the circumstance that prostitution was understood by these Hungarian sex-workers as a family task requires a different understanding of the prostitutes' "pimps" on the one hand and the collective coping of an entire family on the other.

### ***Invisible migrants***

Men who traveled with the sex-workers considered themselves as businessmen and not pimps, as they also took care of the women on the streets. Yet despite their role as relatives and caretakers of sex-workers, they seemed to be invisible in Zurich's red-light districts. Following Löw and Ruhne, who describe the changing notion of the pimp by the public and media since the 1960s, the pimp is "portrayed as something of a passive figure" (2009, 243). This picture still reflects today's view of Hungarian attendants by society and the media. In reality these men, often being an important part of the sex-workers' families, not only suffered from social and economic marginalization, but also became part of the coping process. Therewith "psychological coping strategies can be intensely interpersonal" (Pennebaker and Harber, 1993, 140) and lead to collective coping of

a group, where members would, for example, exchange relevant information (Morris et al., 1976, 678).

Many women testified to one pimp's statement that the attending men in Zurich were more invisible, more passive, less aggressive and dominant on the streets than they would have been in Hungary. They were essential for the entire system and partly involved in money transfer, transportation or housing organisation. Here the pimp represented the economic relationship, whereas partners or family members stand for intimate ties (Katona, 2012). Pimps became the invisible (labour) migrant, meaning that neither his work was visible to the public, nor he could contribute directly to the income, or, as one sex-worker pointed out, their men simply could not earn money with prostitution in Zurich. Therefore, they tried to be as inconspicuous as possible, knowing that they were claimed to be human traffickers (also because some of them simply are). That is why they travelled alone by car (some even with Swiss plates) or by plane, while women usually travelled together by train.

Although, where women are the income generators now, the men's lives seem to be easy-going, they also face difficulties.<sup>8</sup> Being constantly followed by the police narrows the radius of mobility within the city of Zurich and creates perpetual fear and psychological stress. More stressful must be watching close relatives like wives, daughters or sisters working in the sex business. Some women reported that since working as prostitutes they would have agreed together with their partners on a mutual and very personal understanding of love and sex to help their partners deal with jealousy (see also Katona, 2014). By giving a stressful situation a different meaning, Lazarus and Folkman (1984) speak from emotion-focused coping, a strategy which does not change the actual situation, but its perception.

In conclusion, attendant men were not necessarily considered as pimps by the women, nor were they considered to be a negative presence in their lives, but, instead, as part of an active collective coping. Men acted as organisers in the background or as life partners, and women reframed their involvement by changing the meaning of a stressful situation. Structural feminists would argue that the dominant oppression of sex-workers makes them incapable to (re)act (Murchison, 2012). However, this investigation has realised a process of negotiating between pimps and sex-workers. These negotiations are expressed in different ways. One of them is on the personal level of couples who redefine love and sex in order to deal with sex-work within the relationship. Another expression is that women gain more power and start articulating their wishes towards their pimp-partners. This can be seen by those mothers who wanted to send their kids to private schools or who wanted to invest in (rather cheap) property than in luxury goods (like fighting dogs

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<sup>8</sup> The author is not going to take the pimps' side but he wants to outline the difficulties of their lives, which often have direct and very negative effects on the women's lives.

or cars). In addition to men also women of the (extended) family were involved in the organisation of the sex-work abroad, as elaborated in the following section.

### ***Family business***

Referring to the social resilience theory, migrants are improving the social resilience of households in the home country. In addition, the new economics of labour migration (NELM) theory argues that labour migration is not a short-term reaction towards shocks, but a purposely chosen decision to improve livelihood in a long-term perspective (de Haas, 2006, 566–67). Further, “migration decisions are part of family strategies to raise income” (Taylor, 1999, 64). The NELM concept, therefore, considers migrants as individual actors minimising their livelihood risks within family structures and self-determined decisions. Sustainable and long-term risk minimisation can include taking short-term risks, which increase and exposure to more dangerous circumstances, such as the potentially unsafe situations of a sex-worker. Long-term risk minimisation also includes migration flows to and from regions with similar income distribution. Therefore, reasons to migrate are multifarious, individually specific, reflective of dynamic sociological categories, and are unlike neo-classical concepts, which emphasise only legal categories (de Haas, 2011, 10).

Prostitution was not only widely recognised and openly discussed between both genders within Guszev, but also considered as a collective coping mechanism, which involves most members of the family. In addition to sex-work, women were involved in important organisational tasks, such as scheduling, pimping and recruiting. Whereas men were still able to supervise women on the streets in Hungary, it became more dangerous and complicated for them in Switzerland. Therefore, women, who undertake the supervision, led the hierarchy on the streets in Zurich.

Mai (2011, 1238) argues that selling sex can be a way of empowering oneself. In fact, the silent replacement of men had an impact on power relations within Roma families, which leads to a new understanding of agency in a gradual way. Underestimating these degrees of agency and those of sexual awareness of sex-workers leads to “protectionist’ narratives”, which contribute further stigmatisation and marginalisation (ibid, 1239).

Stress and empowerment are perceived within a subjective perception shaped by individual cognition rather than by objective realities (Spreitzer, 1996). Therefore, these women still face a lack of power in relation to their husbands; but, while being disconnected from former places and structures, they did participate more often in family decisions as income generators, especially in regards to parenting. As most sex-workers from Nyíregyháza have children, the next part discusses their action as transnational mothers as they work to maintain emotional connections with them.

### ***Transnational motherhood***

Since, generally, women make up to fifty percent of all migrants (Sjöblom et al., 2007) one finds the “feminisation of labour migration” (Leifsen and Tymczuk, 2012, 224) in all kinds of labour markets worldwide, not only in the sex-industry. Many of these women are mothers (Illanes, 2010), although figures vary between regions – from thirty to fifty-five percent (Cortes, 2013). Becoming a transnational mother means both burden and relief, which eventually can turn migratory processes into stressors and coping mechanisms. The dislocation between mother and child does not necessarily disconnect the mother from motherhood, but, rather, constitutes “one variation in the organizational arrangements, meanings, and priorities of motherhood” (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila, 1997, 548).

For the sex-workers from Nyíregyháza childcare was an important determinant of mobility. Therefore, to manage both sex-work and childcare simultaneously can be a source of stress (Sloss and Harper, 2004). Many sex-workers stated that they began working in the prostitution business when they became a mother and, at the same time, were abandoned by their partners or husbands. Whereas most of the mothers gave birth to their first child before their twenties and only a few mothers have continued education beyond the eighth grade (meaning most of them finished school being 13 years old), the circumstances significantly worsened when the men left (e.g. having less chances to find a job, less income, and sole responsibility for childcare).

Despite these circumstances, these mothers have developed their own transnational (and collective) system to ensure daily contact with their children, which means that the burden of dislocation has been turned into a coping mechanism of working abroad and still being connected in one way or another. Hence, physical absence shall not be misunderstood as emotional absence (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila, 1997). With weekly remittances (usually sent to grandmothers), most of the women ensure that their families have enough money to live on. Daily calls, especially after work in the morning, to wake up the children, and before going to work, in the evening when children go to sleep, are very important for these mother-child-relations. These calls “increase connectivity, shrink barriers and bridge the gap in long-distance social integration” (Leifsen and Tymczuk, 2012, 232).

Some of the women also stayed in contact using internet telephone or social media platforms, while ensuring that their families have computer and internet access at internet cafés, at home or via smart phones – one of the first things they invested in. Mothers frequently sent personal pictures via smart phone or social media platforms. These pictures were usually taken with smiling women, in front of beautiful settings and with good weather, representing an image that everything is fine, although many of them suffer from hard living and bad working conditions. The representation of healthy and good conditions can be considered as both

caretaking, as most mothers do not want their families to be worried (cf. Fedyuk, 2012), and diminishing of threat, by changing the meaning of the situation (cf. Lazarus and Folkman, 1984) – both of them are emotion focused coping mechanisms. In addition to phone calls and internet-based communication, most mothers tried to commute as often as possible. There is no clear pattern of when these women went back to Hungary, because “differences in the cost of travel influence the frequency of return visits” (Leifsen and Tymczuk, 2012, 229).

Back in Hungary, the money earned through prostitution was spent for daily consumption, rent and proper equipment for schooling. Sex-workers said their spending priorities for extra income often differed from their partners. Women reported that men would rather save money for luxury goods, such as fighting dogs or cars. Women, however, showed much more responsibility saving to buy their own property, which, I argue, is a coping strategy sex-workers have developed for addressing their instable socio-economic status. For example, one woman said she worked for five years so as to afford a small house in Nyíregyháza for around 20,000 Euros. Women also reported prioritizing being able to send their children to private schools, where less harassment against Roma is expected. Generally, education was considered very important by all mothers, but not so much for their male partners. This also testifies to the future visions of young Roma women and men interviewed in Guszev. Whereas boys imagine themselves as pimps and patriarchs, girls prefer small families and a job acceptable to society.

In general the mobility of sex-workers from Nyíregyháza was organised within the entire family – that also included fathers, uncles, husbands, brothers and/or cousins as well as sisters, mothers or aunts. The shared tasks and responsibilities allowed some women more participation in decision-making, but also dislocated the mothers from their children. This physical absence does not imply emotional absence, however, as mothers developed strategies to stay connected to their children, frequently moving across borders as transnational mothers. Both family and transnational motherhood – in addition to legal, financial and security factors – strongly influenced the mobility patterns of these sex-workers, which are analysed below.

### **Patterns of labour mobility of Hungarian sex-workers**

The new and stricter interpretation of the prostitution law in Nyíregyháza has shifted the prostitution sector to Switzerland and the Netherlands and has led to circular mobility patterns for the majority of sex-workers who were interviewed. Nevertheless, circular labour mobility is more than just a shift of persons. “Money and love are invested in the home country, which, in turn, renders their mobility into a circular and impermanent pattern” (Dahinden, 2010, 341). Several trends emerged in an analysis of the mobility patterns among Hungarian sex-workers in Zurich. The four most common patterns are discussed in detail below.

One mobility pattern that was observed among the sex-worker migrants was long-term absence from home. Women who wanted to pay back loans or to buy property mentioned staying much longer and taking the risk of working illegally. The money (for loans) appears here as remittances, even though these were sent to family members (Poirine, 1997). Those with previous work experience in the sex-industry tended to stay longer, a few staying more than six years. In addition, it was often the case that the police back home sought these women from Nyíregyháza. Several women said they would rather risk punishments and arrests in Switzerland than go back to Hungary, where months or years in prison were awaiting them. Some said they stayed longer because their partners and children became permanent residents in Switzerland.

The second pattern reflects a transnational mobility, where women moved between different workplaces such as the Netherlands, France, Germany, Spain or Italy and Switzerland. The reasons why those women travelled around Europe are diverse and reflect personal preferences and the ability to network within different countries. Dominant discourse on sex-worker migration frequently assumes that shifting places is often or always facilitated by traffickers (Mattar, 2013) positioning sex-workers within a dependency relationship. However, the interviews in this research have shown both negative and positive reasons for higher and transnational mobility. On the negative side high penances and pending arrests as well as violence of the clients in Switzerland led to higher mobility. Whereas legal permissions of sex-work and some source of infrastructure (official red-light districts, subtle support and counselling by social workers) were positive incentives for transnational mobility.

The third pattern that was observed is a work-shifting system within families where more than one woman is involved in the sex-business. This means, for example, that one woman would work alone non-stop (without holiday or weekends) for a couple of weeks in Zurich, leaving when she felt she had earned enough money. She would then un-register with the Department of Labour and Economics in Zurich and would keep her untapped working days (out of the allowable ninety days) for the next time. At that point, another family member or a friend would take over the job in Switzerland. This system ensures that money is frequently sent home and that women do not work illegally for too long a period. In addition, accommodation and mobile SIM cards would be shared among the women, reducing the cost to each individual migrant. This pattern of shared employment, shared resources and the protection of legal workdays is a strong example of the kinds of coping strategies sex worker migrants have developed within the conditions in Zurich.

The last pattern observed in this research is of single mothers who did not have existing networks and who could not follow a work-shifting system. These sex-workers would not stay several weeks in a row, but would instead commute the 1,200km distance every week by train. Women with very young children said that they tried to go home once a week, although high costs for transportation and

accommodation in Zurich, as well as their low incomes, often forced them to stay much longer.

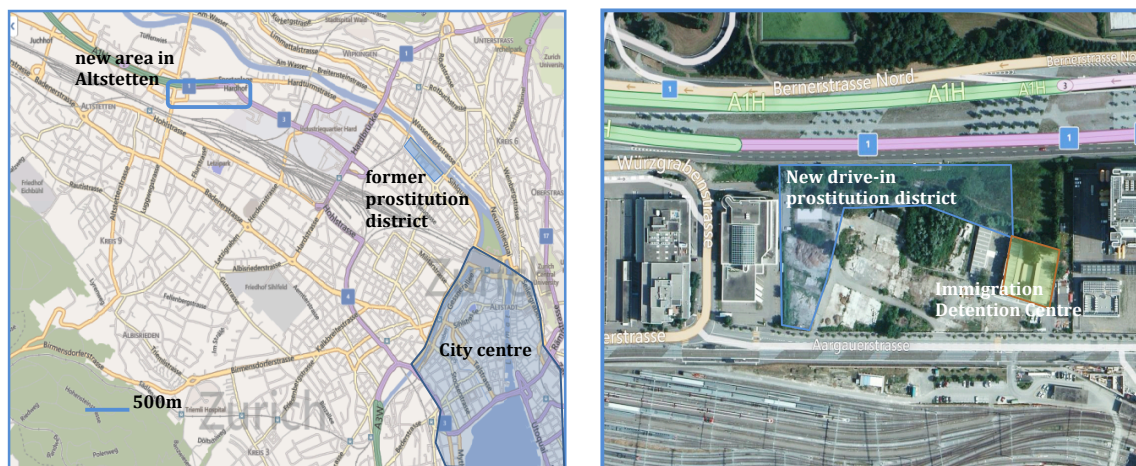
These transnational mobility patterns, which are influenced by legal conditions in Zurich, existing networks across Europe, income rates and obligations to children and other family members, differ from the mobility patterns observed within Switzerland, which will be explored in the next section.

### **Mobility within Switzerland**

The previous two sections explained how transnational mobility is organised and lived. This section focuses on regional mobility within Switzerland, using the argument that mobility is the product of conscious decision-making to deal with a stress situation. To understand the mobility of sex-workers within the borders of Switzerland, I will discuss three factors: the rapid increase in the number of legally registered Hungarian sex-workers in Zurich between 2005 and 2011; working conditions at the former street prostitution district in Zurich; and the shifting of this particular district by the municipal authorities.

The number of legally registered street prostitutes increased from zero in 2005 to 650 per week in February 2010 (Amt für Wirtschaft und Arbeit Kanton Zürich, 2010). On average, more than 400 sex-workers per week applied for the ninety-day work permit throughout the year 2010 (ibid.). Available data provides the number of weekly registrations, but does not track whether or not an individual registered multiple times in the same week, thus distorting the figures of individuals working at any given time. Still, because of the long distance between Zurich and Hungary one can assume that most women stayed at least one week and only a few would register more than once a week. Due to these increasing numbers of sex-workers within a short period of time, prices for apartments increased dramatically and the red-light district for street prostitution was shifted to another location (see map 2 & 3).





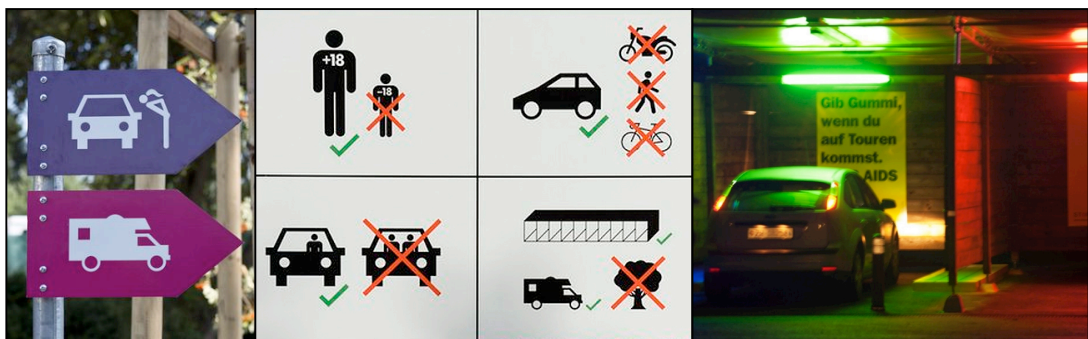
**Map 2: Zurich with former and new prostitution district. Map 3: New area of drive-in sex-boxes in Altstetten next to the Immigration Detention Centre. Sources: bing.com, own composition 2014.**

As a result of the increased rents in apartments close to the red-light district, sex workers reacted with increased mobility. Many women and their attendants left their accommodations in Zurich and moved to smaller cities, such as Baden or Brugg (about 30km away from Zurich), while others moved even further afield to Luzern (50km), Olten (60km) or Bern (130km). This increased their daily commutes between work and home, which was significant considering that some of them were commuting almost weekly between Hungary and Switzerland as well.

Before 2013, the participants reported negative experience by clients on a regular basis, such as pickpocketing, contempt, refusal of payments, acts of violence, rape and kidnapping. In addition, they mentioned feeling repressed by the police, so much so that they did not consider the police as an institution that they would access for help. Many also reported working illegally with the constant fear of losing their jobs and/or freedom. These circumstances gradually intensified leading up to 2013 and, combined, they became strong reasons for Hungarian sex-workers to leave Zurich. Since this article considers coping as a process, where people adjust to their current situation (cf. Lazarus, 1993), abandoning Zurich is understood as a coping mechanism. In addition to the commuters mentioned above, some women moved to Olten, Basel or Geneva in order to work there, while others went back to Hungary where they tried again to survive on their earnings from prostitution, despite the risk of getting arrested. A smaller group of women said they looked for new places in Germany or the Netherlands, where strong networks of sex-workers from Nyíregyháza already exist.

With the shift of the official red-light-district to Altstetten by the municipal authorities in 2013, working conditions and access to the clients have significantly changed, with further implications on mobility. The new district offers better infrastructures (e.g. shower and toilette facilities) and more secure conditions (in regards to aggressive clients such as emergency bottoms) for the sex-workers, yet

these benefits are tempered by the further social and spatial marginalisation of prostitution, as the new district is fenced in and working spaces are confined to drive-in sex-boxes. *Drive-in*, in this context, means that customers can enter the newly created prostitution district only by car (see picture 1 & 2) and will have to stop for the service in one of the covered parking slots (box), in which only the passenger's door can be opened (see picture 3). This newly organised and formalised structure of street prostitution frightened many sex-workers and led to a significant decrease in legal registrations. At the same time, due to massive police presence in the former red-light district, these women could not work illegally any longer. Only after several months of considering other options, did the Hungarian sex-workers return to Zurich and started using the new prostitution area.<sup>9</sup>



**Picture 1 & 2: Instruction signs at the new street prostitution district (sources: nzz.ch; tagesanzeiger.ch). Picture 3: Drive-in sex-boxes (source: stadt-zuerich.ch).**

## Conclusion

This study attempted to overcome the current research impasse on legal sex-work migrants by firmly embedding the empirical analysis in qualitative interviews with sex workers in Zurich and Hungary. Multi-sited research involving qualitative interviews with sex-workers, their partners and other family members, municipal officials and social workers, has been used to develop a critical theoretical framework of the driving forces of labour migration in the sex-industry.

The study argues that neo-classical economic theories, which usually consider migrants as static pawns of rational markets are inappropriate to fully understand the mobility of marginalised migrants, such as Hungarian Roma women. The perspectives of Hungarian sex-workers in Zurich who predominantly belong to the Roma ethnicity illustrate how political, economic and social exclusion can lead to the creation of new coping strategies at a household level. These strategies, focused on risk minimisation and framed within social structures, do not only exist to increase personal welfare, but also to ensure the wellbeing of

<sup>9</sup> Interview with a former social worker in Zurich, 28 February 2014.

the extended family. In this context it is important not to categorize all sex-work migrants as victims of trafficking or criminals in public spaces. Looking at them as capable actors does not only change their duties and rights, but also empowers sex-workers by acknowledging their voice and agency.

Although most of the sex workers I interviewed originate from the same Roma settlement, this research has demonstrated that this group is not homogeneous. Whereas most sex-work migrants have their ethnicity and their status as transnational mothers in common, they have chosen significantly different forms of mobility. Some mothers try to go back home as often as possible and develop a system of weekly commutes. Others left Hungary years ago and followed their own trans-European circles. Their mobility within Switzerland is also increasing due to changing laws, increased rental prices and the deterioration of security in Zurich's red-light districts.

Mobility to undertake prostitution in a different country has been an essential part of the loophole-strategy of the inhabitants of Guszev in Nyíregyháza, which is the main place of origin of most sex-workers on the streets of Zurich's red-light district. The organisation of mobility is not only in the hands of the invisible migrant (the pimp, husband or partner of the sex-worker), but also of the whole extended family, which often exclusively depends on the income of the sex-workers. Furthermore, street prostitution – one of the most physically and psychologically difficult businesses – is shaped by spatial exclusion as well as traditions and gender imbalance within the Roma society.

Nevertheless, poor and poorly educated women from the lowest class in central Europe have been able to shape new realities in both Zurich and their hometowns. These new realities are impacted by strong connections between Zurich and north-eastern Hungary, as well as the omnipresence of Hungarian sex-workers in the red-light districts in Zurich, and the emerging social empowerment of the Romnija. Furthermore, those women have been able to draw attention to the Roma's situation in Hungary (with both their suffering and success), by controlling most of the street prostitution in Zurich and thus making continual appearances in local and international media. Lastly, the new drive-in sex-boxes would not have emerged without such dominance at the former place in Zurich. Although confronted with shifting legal and social challenges, mobility and sex-work involvement only represent two of many coping strategies used by Roma women to better their own lives and those of their families. Influenced by their spatial and social marginalization, the choices of these women and their embodied practices in turn shape the spaces within and across which they move.

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